A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 24

Three months ago, the former Jedi girl had stood before Grievous, pale-faced and trembling, full of fear and doubt, looking so frail and thin that even a stiff breeze could have snapped her. But Komara was made of sterner stuff than she appeared.

Grievous went flying into a wall, a well-timed Force push knocking him off balance. His talons screeched across the deck as he scrambled to stay upright, and resumed his relentless attack. Komara fought with everything she had, sweat streaked down her face, but her jaw was clenched and her eyes hard as she stumbled about. Her left hand gripped her lightsaber, her treacherous right was held behind her back, and she held herself in a stance that echoed of Dooku. Of course it did, Grievous was knocking that passive Form Three nonsense out of her head and teaching her to fight in Dooku's Form Two style. What had he called it, *makashi*? It made sense for a woman like Komara, who was nimble and small, and had only one fighting hand but two perfectly capable feet.

"Yes, good!" Grievous growled, bearing down on her. "Surprise me! Put me on the defensive! Seize the initiative of the fight!"

The girl didn't answer, she leapt forward, but at the last second switched direction and avoided Grievous's parry entirely. He was a cyborg with enhanced reflexes, she was Jedi-trained and Force sensitive, their match was even, on paper. But there was another factor at play.

Grievous reached out with his talons as his free hand shot outwards, he grabbed her sword arm and his foot pinned her against the wall. No matter how good Komara was, nothing would ever change the fact that she was only a hundred and sixty seven centimeters tall, while Grievous was more than two heads taller and had the limbs to match. Human biology and sexual dimorphism had written her disadvantage in reach and height into her blood, and strength too, if she went up against a male of her own species with equivalent training.

He had warned Komara that she would need every bit of skill and agility she had to compensate for that. Especially against Form Five users, who relied on force and speed over agility and precision. Skywalker had been one of those Jedi, Grievous knew, and Adi Gallia as well. Grievous had become intimately familiar with the forms of lightsaber combat in the past three years, the most valuable thing Dooku had taught him.

"You have marginally improved," said Grievous, releasing her. More than marginally, but he wasn't going to give her a reason to slack off. She had gotten noticeably stronger and quicker, a trend Grievous wished to continue.

"We do this every day," Komara panted, wiping her brow.

"And every day you lose," said Grievous. "But it will be worth it, to lose to me a thousand times and win once on the battlefield."

"I suppose that's the day you forgive the Jedi," the girl said.

Grievous's eyes narrowed. "Go clean up, then return, we have something to discuss," he ordered.

"Roger roger," Komara said, giving him a flat glare. Grievous rolled his eyes. *Impudent!*

In the weeks since Operation Heist's success, Grievous had been busy organizing and planning his next feat. But there was a temporarily bigger problem on his mind. The story of how that problem came to be was rather convoluted. When Komara returned, he began to explain it.

Khan's fleet had returned from the Corporate Sector for repairs, including a destroyer that barely limped into spacedock, the unfortunate ship Komara and that officer had taken within twelve kilometers of a black hole's event horizon. He hadn't thought that a big deal, until the other Human's after action report had explained just how insane that was and how they'd come within seconds of a reactor core meltdown *and* the ship tearing itself apart. Grievous had pushed Komara extra hard in training for that stupid gamble.

That officer, the strange little man from the engineering section who had been fixing Vulture droids for some time, his report had more. The first thing had been bizarre, the official request for a transfer to *Encounter* to oversee the repairs, apparently tasked to him by Komara herself. The second thing had been infuriating. Dwarfing the action report on Operation Heist in the Corporate Sector was a dossier on the predatory practices of the Commerce Guild and other corporate suppliers to the Confederate Navy. The lieutenant had compiled, over the course of the whole war, every instance of corporate foolery, mischief, planned obsolescence, willful neglect, sabotage, and instance of racketeering he had had to deal with. Grievous had been disappointed, but not surprised. The rage only came when he reached the conclusion of lieutenant's findings: the estimated cost to the Confederacy, as a result of these misdeeds, was enough credits and materials to fund and build a twenty thousand ship battle fleet. The Confederate Navy's strength had peaked at eighty thousand ships a year and a half ago. Grievous had used all of his willpower not to kill the former Separatist Council members with his bare hands.

"You didn't actually do that, right?" asked Komara, looking concerned.

"No," said Grievous. "I had a better idea, and waited."

"Oh no..." the girl sighed, hiding her face in her hands.

At four in the morning, Raxus time, Grievous and his magnaguards had descended on the planet's highest security prison, using his Supreme Commander's override codes to get through without speaking to anyone, and to stop any interference. His guards rounded up the former Council members, and herded them into an empty room. There, Grievous explained everything the lieutenant's dossier had laid bare.

"*How else were we supposed to make money back on our investment?*" Shu Mai had asked, defiant as ever. "*This is how business works.*"

Grievous's eyes had narrowed. "Pathetic," he growled, before turning to San Hill. "And *you*, you altered my mind, when you put me in this body. You broke our deal."

The Muun was shaking. "It wasn't me! It was all Dooku's idea!" he squealed.

"Shameless," Grievous said, not surprised that Hill had rolled over to the Sith lord, if he even had put up any resistance on the issue. "You spineless worms will now meet the only fate you deserve for this treachery."

"You can't kill us!" Passel Argente said. "We haven't had a trial!"

"Please, have mercy!" someone else cried, some leech Grievous didn't know the name of.

"I'm not going to kill you," said Grievous, taking several steps back. The lot of them had a collective sigh of relief, until Grievous nodded to his guards. "They are."

Eight electrostaves crackled to life.

"Crush them, make them suffer!" Grievous cackled. The screams of the traitors dying was music to his mechanical ears. They weren't worthy of dying to the hands of a warrior.

When he finished his story of this morning's events, Komara was staring glumly at him. "Why am I not surprised you've done something like this?" she asked herself. "And why did I need to know?"

"Because now the *civilian* government is asking questions." Grievous would have stuck out his tongue in disgust if he still had one. "I have not responded. I thought this would be something you were better prepared to handle."

"Me?" Komara's mouth hung open for a moment. "Why would you ever think I'd help you cover up a murder?"

"It's not a cover up," Grievous said, waving a hand. "I mean to explain everything. But you ought to know the best angle of approach, yes?"

The girl groaned, and paced about, thinking for a moment. "Okay, fine. They were traitors, that alone makes them worthy of execution. After a trial. Which you didn't have. But they were also saboteurs willfully holding back the war effort, according to Voyan's report. Those people also get executed in war. After a trial. A trial... A military trial, a military tribunal, because their crimes effected the military-" She snapped her fingers. "That's it! Their sentence was passed down in a secret military tribunal and you carried it out."

"Perfect," said Grievous. "But there was no military tribunal."

"We can have a posthumous one," Komara said. "Good grief, I can't believe I'm helping you get away with murder."

"They had it coming."

"Yes, they did," the girl agreed. "Who knows how many thousands or millions died because of their greed. And that San Hill was especially slimy, what he did to you and all. Look, I'm not sad they're gone. The galaxy is better off without them. But would it have hurt to do it legally?"

"I was too angry for legalism," Grievous said. "You should know me by now, Komara."

"Ugh! You're impossible!" Komara looked like she was about to pull out her own hair. "You just... stay up here in your tower, don't go off killing anyone extra-judicially, and I'll... I'll go find some precedent cases, or something, alright? You're the leader of this government, you need to act like it."

"You are not my priestess," Grievous muttered, thinking of the stern woman who'd led his village after all the other adults had been taken away in chains.

"What? Never mind. Just stay there!"

Esera spent an hour combing through the military history of the Republic, looking for similar cases. The problem with secret tribunals was that they were secret, though. After a while, she gave up, and just asked the madmen on *m11talk·rax*, and they got her four separate incidents in as many minutes. Military history experts, amateur or not, had their uses. Her Confederate Navy address was becoming well known on that forum. Esera regretted her first name was attached to that address, they all called her Esera now, and there were only so many Eseras in the galaxy. One of the posters even theorized her question was connected to the sudden execution of the coup plotters, which was already making headlines on the shadowfeeds.

She returned to *Invisible Hand*'s tower, where Grievous had obediently stayed put and not killed anyone else. "I've got four precedents from the Republic's history, that'll cover us legally, as we are the successor state to the Republic. Now we need officers for the tribunal. Officers you trust to keep quiet."

"How many?" asked Grievous.

"Uh... three," said Esera. "Flag officers, preferably."

Grievous tapped away at his console. "Done."

Within half a minute, two holograms sprang up. One was a severe-looking Umbaran, with slicked back silver hair, whose smile was as cold as ice. The other was a huge, robed hybrid between a tailless lobster and a crab, standing just as tall as Grievous did upright, no emotion visible on his face, which was merely a mass of mandibles and feelers, four beady black eyes, and a pair of rigid antenna. He held a walking stick of all things in one of his claws.

"What is the emergency, General?" asked the Umbaran.

"Kronaak reporting, sir," said the big crustacean, in a deep voice produced by all the wrong parts for mimicking humanoid speech. *A Viraanntesse?* Esera thought. *That's a rare sight!*

Moments later, a third hologram joined, a Human man who was dripping wet and out of uniform. In fact, he wasn't wearing anything at all, but for a towel around his waist. He was slender, but clearly athletic, looking at those broad shoulders and strong arms, and wore a neatly-trimmed beard that couldn't hide a sharp jaw. He couldn't have been over twenty-five. *Huh,* Esera thought. She felt a heat growing in her face, though she had no reason to be embarrassed. "General!" the man said, giving Grievous a sharp salute. "My apologies for my appearance, this emergency caught me in the middle of a shower."

Grievous did his dismissive hand wave. "Hithlu, Kronaak, Eemon," he addressed each of them in turn, "I have called you here to review the verdict you gave me on last night's military tribunal."

The two humanoids looked puzzled, Kronaak twitched his antenna and mandibles. "Sir, there was no tribunal last night," Kronaak said.

"Of course there wasn't!" Grievous hissed. "This is a posthumous tribunal, but as far as everyone else is concerned, it happened last night."

"What was our verdict, then?" asked Hithlu the Umbaran.

"The immediate execution of the guilty," said Grievous.

"Alright," Eemon said with a nod, arms crossed. "Who did we execute and what did they do?"

"The coup plotters," Grievous told them. "They were guilty of not only treason, but sabotage, racketeering, war profiteering, and willful neglect of materials."

"They got what they deserved," said Kronaak. "I only regret I couldn't carry out the sentence myself."

"I carried out the sentence at 04:00 hours, Raxus time," Grievous said. He tapped his console again. "Sign this document." The three signed. "You will never speak of this to anyone again, understood?"

"Yes sir," the three said.

"Dismissed."

The holograms vanished. "That was easy," said Esera, shifting on her feet. "So, uh... that Eemon fellow, was he related to *that* Eemon?"

"Yes, Ricimer Eemon is Ado Eemon's son," Grievous said. "He has proven surprisingly competent in battle and logistics."

"Huh," said Esera. She shook her head, trying to make her blush go away. "Well, um, is there anything else, General?"

Grievous gave her a narrow-eyed look, tilting his head. "No," he said after a few moments. "Keep working on those holocrons."

"They're so boring, though!"

"I need to know what Dooku and Sidious were planning, in detail," said Grievous. "It is clear they were manipulating the war, but to what end eludes me."

"Very well," sighed Esera. She went back down the elevator to her quarters.

Only days were left before the great offensive began. One by one, ships had been slipping away from their regional fleets to marshal in secret at Bimmisaari, a planet on the Lesser Lantillian hyperlane that was an unhappy member of the Confederacy. Kronaak had done his reading, the Bimms had always been loyal to the Republic, so much that they'd opened their planet's gates to refugees fleeing the countless local brush-fire wars of the Separatist Crisis that had led up to the current conflict. The Bimms were small, peace-loving, and hospitality was a cornerstone of their culture, they had no military. The planet had been bloodlessly conquered six days after Geonosis, as the newly-organized Confederate Navy sprang out of the Tion Cluster and towards the core. Kronaak and *Aethra* had been there. They hadn't even the time to paint the Confederate hexagon on the battleship, let alone deal with the battle damage from Geonosis.

Now, Kronaak had returned with his battleship, scarred and seared by three years of war, but stronger than ever. Bimmisaari had no heavy industries and contributed nothing more than a handful of orbital fueling stations to the war effort, Republic spies seldom came to it. The system didn't have the infrastructure to handle the thousands of ships gathering there. But they wouldn't be there long.

The huge auditorium meetings had been done away with in favor of compartmentalization. Grievous now consulted only his top admirals and generals for this offensive's planning. Blox Hatha's raids had scared the Republic into pulling even more ships out of the Outer and Mid Rim to chase him, their supply lines were buckling under the pressure of repeated raids from the likes of Khan and Kronaak. Operation Heist had been an unexpected and absolute success, war production was at the highest it had been in a year, and only growing stronger, as new resources and capital poured into the Confederacy's industries. A giddy feeling came over Kronaak, the same as he'd gotten as they hurtled towards Coruscant three months ago.

"Operation Striking Star will be the most important battle of the war," Grievous's hologram told his top officers. He was still at Raxus, dealing with the civilian government. "You will win, or you will die. Should you fail in the coming days, everything you have fought for will be destroyed, and you with it. Is that understood?"

A chorus of "Yes, sir," answered the cyborg.

"Then I will give you your orders." Grievous addressed each officer individually, though all were present for it. Rame Cartroll would be remaining at Sluis Van to oversee the rebuilding of his fleet and defend that vital fortress. Pors Tonith was remaining where he was to wage a feint offensive at Mygeeto, which would begin tonight. Mar Tuuk would be commanding defensive operations in the Confederacy's largest holding, a crescent-shaped region of space stretching from Serenno to the Corporate Sector – or the Stark Sector, as it was now, down to the Tion Cluster and Saleucami, and then back again to the doorstep of Kashyyyk.

The rest of them had more interesting tasks. Hithlu, Helnurath, Kronaak, Khan, and Khwaramanes would each be leading a prong of a five-pronged attack: Hithlu would hit Kashyyyk head-on, pinning the bulk of Republic forces there. Kronaak and the super tactical droid Khan would metaphorically hike cross-country through the most minor and obscure of hyperlanes, scouted by their Givin comrade, and emerge unexpectedly at Yitabo, they'd take Randon and Khan would sail onward to Terr'Skiar, before they both struck up towards Kashyyk. Helnurath would attack Uyter from Togoria. The Stenax, the droid, and Kronaak would roll up Republic resistance all the way to Kashyyyk, until Khwaramenes finished his two-week transit of his own theoretically-existent-but-undiscovered hyperlanes and seize Torn Station, a vital fueling stop for Republic fleets in the region. This would complete the encirclement of the Republic at Kashyyyk, and then they would wage the battle of annihilation.

"This is how we beat the huk," Grievous told them, pacing through the projected star chart. "We did not have numbers like they did, but we had the will to win, and we knew our weapons well. The chieftains knew we would stop at nothing to destroy the enemy, and let us operate as we saw fit. I will not dictate how you achieve your objectives. Only that you must achieve them. I leave the details to you. We will surround the enemy, we will cut their supplies, we will shatter their belief in victory, we will attack, attack, attack! Until they are dead."

"Or surrendered?" asked Eemon, who was the unfortunate sacrifice to the gods of logistics and would be supplying all five fleets involved in the battle, including the ones that went off the map of known hyperlanes. Somehow.

"Perhaps," said Grievous.

"Speed is of the essence," Hithlu said. "*Cataclysm* is a single ship, with no less than eight thousand ships either chasing her or positioned against her. The Republic's military leadership is not stupid. They will figure out quite quickly that Blox Hatha is just a distraction."

"Two weeks, gentlemen, two weeks is all you have," Khwaramenes told them. The little Givin's voice was high and clear among the hulking brutes that were Kronaak, Grievous, and Helnurath. "My gravitational analysis indicates there *must* be a navigable route from Balamak to Torn Station that avoids Kashyyyk. My transit analysis indicates it will take thirteen days of jumps to traverse."

"How many jumps?" asked Eemon, the wheels turning in his head.

"Ninety-eight."

The officers muttered. "You'll be running on fumes by the time you get to Torn Station," said Eemon. "My transports don't have that kind of range."

"That shouldn't be an issue, we'll use Torn Station's fuel for ourselves," said Khwaramenes.

"Risky," said Cartroll. "But what do I know? I'll just be sitting at Sluis Van while you all save the Confederacy."

"Do not underestimate your role," Grievous told him. "If the Republic realizes we have committed over half our remaining fleets to this, then they will be coming after you."

"General," Helnurath said, his voice rumbling through the room, even through speakers. "What is your role in this battle?"

"I will be managing morale..." Grievous said, amusement in his eyes when he saw his officer's bewilderment, "...by killing Jedi, of course!" The cyborg laughed maniacally, and Kronaak was happy to see Grievous was still more or less his old self.

"Something has come up," Grievous told Esera.

"Yeah?"

"I will be away for the next few weeks. Do you want a mission, or leave time?" asked Grievous.

"That depends what the mission is," said Esera. She hated being idle for too long, but leave time had an appeal...

"Darth Sidious owned a ship, a courier-sized vessel named *Scimitar.* This previously belonged to his failure of an apprentice, Darth Maul." Grievous showed her a hologram of the ship, a sleek, angular piece of machinery with trademark Sienar radiators. "Find this ship and bring it here."

"That's it?" asked Esera.

"Yes. Unless you want to help that lieutenant fix up the destroyer you two broke."

Oh, right. *Encounter*. Was Voyan over there, all on his own? Esera had barely thought about him since they went their own ways. No wonder she hadn't seen him on *Invisible Hand* in three weeks, he wasn't even on the ship anymore. "I wasn't aware he'd transferred."

"My chief of engineering was all too happy to get rid of him," Grievous went on. "And that lieutenant has it in his head that it's his singular duty to bring that destroyer back to operational status. Bah! Scrap the ship and be done with it, I'd say!"

"Why haven't you?" asked Esera.

"Because that would be forcing an easy way out on him," said Grievous. "If he wants to repair that destroyer by himself, I will let him. I respect a man who takes on the impossible. And if he gives up, I will laugh at his weakness."

"I see... So, when do I go find this *Scimitar?*"

"Right now," Grievous said. "I'm taking *Invisible Hand* somewhere soon, pack your things and get moving."

Esera gave a start. "Okay, can I get some leave time first? I have stuff I'd like to drop off, I need to charter a ship, I need to find the damn thing first-"

"Take as much time as you need," said Grievous. "Bring that ship back."

"Alright, alright," Esera said. "But there's one more thing."

"Yes?"

"I've been living off the charity of my Sephi friends and shipboard supplies. Jedi don't get paid, but I'm not a Jedi anymore, I don't have the Temple's support network. Uh... This goes against everything I was taught, but... I need money, Grievous." Esera cringed in her soul as she said that. "I don't want to leech off others forever."

The cyborg looked at her thoughtfully. "I agree," he said. "A guest must not overstay her welcome, yes?"

"Something like that," Esera said, nodding.

"Assuming you entered the Navy at the rank of ensign, and then aided in my destruction of the coup, helped me uncover a Sith plot, were wounded in the line of duty by the abominable Togruta brat, conquered a planet for me in one evening, and then conquered the Corporate Sector in a week..." Grievous tapped away at the keyboard on his desk, eyes flickering back and forth over a display only he could see. "By the order of me, Head of State and Supreme Commander, I am promoting you to the rank of captain."

Esera blinked once in surprise. "Well, uh... this isn't what I expected."

"Captain Komara of Naval Intelligence," said Grievous. "I think you'll be paid above your grade, in recognition of your services, and hazards of occupation."

"We have a naval intelligence branch?" asked Esera.

"Yes," the cyborg said.

"I've never heard of it."

"It's new."

"Who runs it?"

"You do." Grievous leaned forwards, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

It was all she could do not to start sputtering. "Wait, we didn't have a naval intelligence service? And why am I running it? I'm not trained for this kind of thing! I'm seventeen years old, no one's going to listen to me!"

"When I was your age-" Grievous started, but Esera wasn't having it.

"You were fighting huk and living in the swamp, yeah, I've heard it before! I was crawling through the rubble on Shumavar and getting my leg almost blown off by snipers. But unless I go tell everyone I meet I used to be a Jedi Knight and was off killing their friends, do you think I'm going to be taken seriously?"

The cyborg stared at her, unamused. "Your lack of self-confidence disgusts me," he said. "Enough self-pity, I won't tolerate any more. You will accept this rank and you will accept this mission and that will be the end of it."

"Self-pity!?" Esera was fuming. "It's the truth!"

"Silence, girl," Grievous growled. "If you don't stop this pathetic mewling I will call up young Eemon while he's in the shower again." Esera felt her face go red, and her mouth opened and closed as she searched for a response that just wasn't there. That made Grievous laugh. "Yes, that's what I thought." He pushed a datapad across his desk. "Take this to Minister Gunray down in Raxulon, he'll see to your payroll. Then find that ship for me. It may hold answers we seek."

She had no choice. Esera gathered up her possessions and R8, and descended to the planet, now an official member of the Separatist military, a one-woman service branch. One-girl, honestly. She wasn't even a legal adult on Raxus. It had never seemed weird to her, to be as young as she was and entrusted with so much responsibility. They'd made her a commander when she was fourteen, leading clone troopers! But after seeing the rest of the galaxy, beyond the Jedi Temple and Grand Army of the Republic, Esera realized just how unusual she was. And that made her very self-conscious.

Iaclyn and Elli Stark were only a few years older than me, so were Yashar and Faera... She couldn't stop thinking about what her life might have been like if she'd never been taken by the Jedi. What would she do? What did she even like doing? What was she even good at? Esera never had the chance to learn any of that. Everything had been put on hold for the war. *And I'm not even good at war,* she thought sourly.

Her first stop was the Ministry of Finance. The seasonal thaw had begun on Raxus, the icicles were dripping and the snow was wet and slushy. But it was still cold, and Esera rushed inside. A female Nemoidian took her name and asked her to wait for a bit, before ushering her in to the office of this Gunray. Esera thought the name was familiar, but she didn't figure it out until she saw him.

"You're the Viceroy!" she blurted, when she saw *the* Nute Gunray.

"What?" asked he. "Who are you?"

"You're Viceroy Gunray! I saw you on the holonet all the time when I was young!" Esera said. "You tried to invade Naboo and failed, they took you to court so many times-"

"My invasion was a complete success!" Gunray snapped. "I was only defeated by that wretched queen's tricks and that boy Skywalker getting a lucky shot!"

Esera grinned. "I'm sure you would have won if you hadn't have lost," she said.

The Nemoidian gave her a tight-lipped glare. "Who are you, anyway? And why are you here?"

"Esera Komara," *former Jedi Knight,* she might have added, as she slid the datapad across Gunray's desk. "I'm here to get paid."

The once-viceroy of the Trade Federation picked up the pad and looked at it, his red eyes widening. He looked at her, then back to the pad. "You are the most highly paid captain in the fleet, you know," he said.

"Grievous seems to think I'm worth it," said Esera.

"I will never understand what goes through that creature's head."

"Yeah, it's a real mess in there, he's not sure either."

That remark got her another stare, but Gunray's professional returned swiftly. "I was unaware the Navy had an intelligence branch of its own," he said. "New departments seem to be appearing everywhere, these days."

"These are interesting times, Viceroy."

"Minister, if you please," sighed Gunray. "I'm no longer with the Trade Federation."

"Did your patriotic duty finally get the best of you?" asked Esera.

"Yes, yes it did," the Nemoidian said, nodding firmly. "I could no longer sit by at the head of a supposedly neutral corporation, I felt the call to do my part."

"Right..." Esera said. *I don't believe it, not one bit!*

There was one problem that Minister Gunray alerted her to. Esera had no bank account to put newly-gained credits in. She was forced to run off to one with R8 in tow before closing time, and opened an account in record time, before dashing back to the Ministry of Finance before it closed too. After that, she could check her bank account through the shadowfeed and see the sudden deposit of fifty thousand credits. Esera thought that was a lot, until she remembered the Confederate credit was weaker than the Republic credit. In reality, she had closer to thirty thousand, a very respectable sum, more than what most middle class workers on Coruscant made in a half a year. On a planet like Stalimur, that was more than what some people made in a lifetime. She sent her information to the Starks in the Corporate Sector, so her cut of the profit from their treaty could have somewhere to land.

Esera, by galactic standards, had become a rich woman in the course of an afternoon. "What can I do with this?" she asked R8, as they took a taxi speeder to the Sephi sister's home outside the city.

R8 blinked and beeped.

"There's got to be good causes I can help. It's not like I need all this."

R8 whistled lowly.

"Yeah, I should probably have some kind of savings fund, though. You never know when emergencies will happen. But still, maybe there's... an orphanage in need, or something, you know?"

The astromech droid chirped in approval. Esera hoped it was approval. She really had no idea what R8 was saying, but they always seemed to get along, so Esera guessed she was understanding him one way or another.

"We're going on another adventure soon," said Esera. "Just us, this time. No Zygerrians, no battle droids, no Lieutenant Voyan. You hardly met him, though."

R8 made another whistle, sounding frightened.

"I heard he talks to Vulture droids. Is that weird? I mean, I talk to you. But he was definitely a weird guy. These two Sephi ladies are the most normal people I've ever met, you know. I'm glad we're going to see them again."

The two Sephi were glad to see her, too. "The hero of the Confederacy!" Lirka almost screamed, when Esera arrived. She and her sister Sirka got right along at making Esera feel at home, and for the first time in weeks, Esera felt she could finally relax. Complaining about real, free food was something that Esera didn't do, but it was nice to eat something that wasn't Nemoidian for once. No training with Grievous in the morning was nice too, the cyborg delighted in making her suffer. However, Dooku's holocrons had followed Esera here, in her luggage. No one in the galaxy knew what a holocron was who wasn't a Jedi, a Sith, or someone closely associated with them. The Sephis thought they were just exotic trinkets.

For a few days, Esera lingered on Raxus, doing such mundane, normal person activities as hitting up the town with her only two organic friends. On one such occasion she got R8 a suddenly very affordable and high quality oil bath while Lirka and Sirka dragged her to their favorite salon to tidy her up.

"You've really filled out in the last few months," Sirka said, with a sly smirk.

"What do you mean?" Esera asked.

"She means you actually look like a woman," said Lirka, giggling. "You've got hips now, haven't you noticed?"

Esera's face went red hot. "I've just been getting exercise and eating healthy," she said. "What's the big deal?"

"Oh, settle down, Esera," Sirka sighed. "It's a compliment. You're looking a lot better than you did when you first came here, alright?"

"Yeah," Lirka agreed. "You were a sickly little bog witch back then. You'd be unrecognizable if you hadn't been staying in touch with us. And if we weren't the ones behind your fashionable transformation." The sisters exchanged a nod of satisfied approval, before whisking her off to shop for clothes.

In fact, Esera *had* noticed the changes she'd undergone since her first arrival on Raxus. Three months of eating well – even if it was mostly Nemoidian food – had put her back at a healthy weight... and fueled a long-delayed growth spurt in areas other than height. All her clothes had gotten tighter in certain regions, below her waist and across her chest. But mostly below her waist. She was embarrassed to no end about it, though there was another part of her that was enjoying these changes to her proportions. The same part of her that had eyed up Ricimer Eemon, probably. Just remembering that made her blush again.

For her whole life, she'd been told to avoid attachments and shun carnal desire. Now that she was free from the mutually-enforced self-denial of the Jedi Order, Esera realized she had no idea how to deal with the natural instincts and inclinations that were slowly becoming harder to ignore. At the moment, she could shove them aside with a little effort and focus on the tasks at hand. But how long would she be able to do that? *I need someone to talk to, but there's no one I'm comfortable enough with...* As she usually did, Esera pushed her concerns over everything she hadn't been taught about herself out of her mind. One day she'd be unable to ignore them any longer, but that day was not this day.

In the evenings, Esera scoured Dooku's holocrons for any hint of *Scimitar*. On the third night, she found it. The elusive Sidious had tasked Dooku with the incredibly trivial mission of covering up a financial trial that let from Sidious to a shell corporation on Naboo that was supposedly contracted to provide maintenance to a vessel named *Scimitar* residing in a hangar in the capital of Theed. Dooku had used the opportunity to harass Anakin Skywalker and the Gungans, but details were vague. "We're going to Naboo, R8," Esera told her droid companion.

Before she left, a most curious incident occurred. A herald arrived at the Sephi sisters' home, summoning Esera to the palace of the Grand Prince of Raxus. "Raxus has a prince?" she asked Lirka.

"Yes, it does," said Lirka. "You didn't think this aristocracy came from nowhere, did you?"

"Well, no..."

"This planet was ruled by the Sith Empire, a thousand years ago," whispered Sirka. "All the nobles are descended from retainers of those Sith lords who once dwelt here."

"Oh, wonderful," Esera whispered back. The sisters didn't understand her apprehension. To the galactic community at large, the Sith were nothing more than ancient history, a rival sect to the Jedi, who themselves were a curious and quaint relic of ancient history.

The Grand Prince was an aged gentleman that reminded Esera a little of Dooku, but plumper and kindlier and completely devoid of hostility or malice, which soothed her fear that a man forty generations removed from the days of the Sith might somehow retain the wickedness of those warriors of old. He met her in a state room, attended by very well-dressed guards armed vibrospears that looked more decorative than practical, as well as a number of functionaries. Word had reached the Prince's ears that a girl, probably from Stalimur, of no notable birth and unknown parentage had been passing herself off as a Raxian noble lady. *I know who my parents are!* Esera wanted to say, but she kept her mouth shut as the Prince rambled on. But things took a surprising turn.

"We were quite shocked, shocked I tell you, to hear about this," the Prince was saying. "The bloodlines of Raxus are ancient and prestigious, it's not every day someone is brave enough to pass herself off as one of us. But in light of your remarkable achievements, the liberation of Zygerria's slaves, the annexation of their wicked empire, the conquest of the Corporate Sector, the humiliation of the despicable Loyalist bootlick Baron Tagge, why, we just couldn't stay angry at you! If one of our great General's diplomats has need to pass herself off as one of us, then by all means, let her do it the right way!"

The Grand Prince waved an attendant forward, who presented Esera with a scroll of paper – real paper! – sealed with a wax stamp. Esera took it gingerly, unsure of how she should handle actual paper. "This, my dear girl, is an act of the House of Peers, officially allowing you legal use of the title Lady Esera Komara of Raxus in your missions on behalf of the Confederacy of Independent Systems."

"Oh," said Esera. "Uh... thanks."

"Technically, you've been made a peer of Raxus, and technically, you would be within your rights to vote in the House of Peers. Technically..." The Prince rambled on a bit more, but eventually got the point: this title was not hereditary and only carried the most basic of privileges the Raxian nobility had, namely, voting in the House of Peers and using said title in a formal setting. Esera wasn't keen on either, but she'd do the latter if she had to. She thanked the Grand Prince profusely, and his ministers, and his servants too, as a Jedi should be humble. Though she wasn't a Jedi, she had to keep reminding herself.

"Well, R8, I'm a real lady now," she told her droid, waving the scroll at him. "Next, we find passage to Naboo."

Grievous paced back and forth on *Invisible Hand*'s bridge. "How much longer?" he asked.

"Only a minute left on fueling, sir," Captain Dofine reported.

"Why are we wasting time with this?" Grievous growled.

"Rear Admiral Eemon requested all ships take on as much fuel as possible before departing, to ease the strain on our supply lines," said Dofine. "I am obliging him as per your instructions."

Grievous snorted, and shook his head, before returning to his pacing.

Operation Striking Star was going to begin in only a few days. An excited energy ran through what was left of his organic components, an energy that was shared with the rest of his officers. Even Dofine was subject to it, in subtle ways. His heart-rate was slightly above average, his hands drummed on the armrest of the captain's chair, he kept glancing at a chart of timetables he had on display.

"Fueling complete, General. Ready to depart for Bimmisaari."

"Engage," Grievous ordered, swinging his arm forward.

The stars streaked past, and the cruiser hurtled into hyperspace. On his heads-up display, he had a countdown running. Less than forty-eight hours remained. With *Invisible Hand* assuredly on the move, Grievous returned to his tower and deal with civilian communiques. The serpent, Corlissi Ludar, was running the government on a day-to-day basis, but major things still required Grievous's approval. More interestingly, a report had come from Komara: she'd found the location of *Scimitar.*

It was true Grievous wanted the ship in order to access its databanks. But there was another goal he had in mind. The ship had been built with a cloaking device, a rare and powerful technology. Ventress's ship had a cloaking device and had allowed her and the Tano brat to board his ship and rescue a high value prisoner. Such tactic flexibility would be an excellent addition to the Confederacy, or at the very least, Grievous's own resources. Giving a woman with Jedi training like Komara such a ship to use would open many doors as well.

More reports, more communiques. How had Dooku done this for three years without going crazy? *At last, I understand,* thought Grievous, remembering the times Dooku had gone off on dangerous missions despite his important political status. No wonder he had been obsessed with Skywalker, Dooku wanted a challenging fight to work off the frustration of dealing with civilians constantly. Grievous was off to find a challenging fight, too. He wondered what Jedi would make their way to Kashyyyk.

The final report of the day was from Clothar Aclinde, writing from the former Corporate Sector, since renamed the Stark Sector by its new rulers. The head of the Office of Information and Safety was convinced Iaco Stark would hold up his end of the bargain as long as the war was going well, and when he had second thoughts, his son was ready and willing to formally take over operations there.

Twenty-four hours remained. Grievous dueled with his magnaguards in a deserted corridor of the ship. He reviewed the fleets at Bimmisaari. He pestered Eemon about the supply convoys he was putting together. He gave Ludar the Serpent instructions to act as he saw fit with Congress, with mind to the final victory. He sent one last message to Komara, reminding her the Jedi were not her friends and to use her training well. Grievous realized that he was nervous. How long had it been since he was nervous? If *he* was nervous, his soldiers must be nervous too.

I've been here before, Grievous realized. *The day before we began our offensive to break that siege... what siege? What city?* He couldn't put a name or a time to it, but he'd been young. Not even Komara's age, yet. He remembered getting into the troop carrier, converted from a domestic cargo hauler, durasteel armor welded to the sides, a small home-made turret placed on top. Young Grievous had held his rifle close to his chest, and watched the older men strap on belts full of grenades.

It is better to die in glory than live a single moment as a slave, they'd told him. *If we are to fall, we will take as many huk as we can with us. The fate of our people is on our shoulders, young one! Victory or martyrdom!*

There had been many martyrs made, in those days. But in the end, the Kaleesh had won. No sacrifice had been too great to make against the invaders, no life too important to give up for the sake of the greater whole. Grievous wished he could inspire that fanaticism in his troops, but droids had no spirit. Kenobi had told him that, once, long ago. *But droids aren't all I have, now,* thought Grievous. He had a miniature army of organic officers under him, this time, competent and creative. He *could* inspire them.

Zero hour arrived. Each task force left orbit of Bimmisaari and oriented itself towards its hyperlane of travel, each awaiting Grievous's word. He watched them from the bridge of *Invisible Hand.* "Captain, put me on an open channel to the fleet," he told Dofine.

"You're on, sir," said Dofine.

"Soldiers of the Confederacy, this is Grievous speaking," Grievous said, knowing his voice was carrying to every warship in the system. "For three years, you have fought against the corrupt and tyrannical Republic, throwing off its chains of oppression and injustice wherever you went, never stopping, never complaining, never surrendering. Months ago, you came with me on a daring raid into the heart of the enemy, cutting off the head of the beast, showing everyone that even the mightiest dictator is not safe from our wrath. It was not enough to win the war, despite all we sacrificed for that victory. I will not lie to you. You are outnumbered, you are outgunned, you face technology far superior to yours, you are taking on a rotten state with all the plundered wealth of the Galaxy and an unyielding slave army at its disposal. Your chances of victory are slim.

"But know this! There is something stronger than any steel, stronger than any flesh or bone: it is the will to triumph. Your enemy fights to enrich themselves, your enemy fights to cling to their power a day longer, your enemy fights because they were born to be killed and dare not imagine any other fate. You fight for your homes! You fight for your families! You fight to create a future you may never see! You fight because you would rather die standing than live a single moment in subjugation to these parasites! If you fail here, all that you love and cherish will be destroyed at the putrid hands of the leeches and worms who have ruled over you for a thousand years and would rule a thousand more. This is the most important battle you will ever fight. Should you be defeated, the rest of the Confederacy will fall within a year. Should you win, victory will be within our reach, however far off. The fate of your nation is on your shoulders. Find the will to triumph, and no foe may stand against you. Now, all fleets, commence Operation Striking Star!"

Grievous motioned for Dofine to close the channel, and he did. "An excellent speech, sir," Dofine said.

"I have no reason to fight this war, but to take my revenge on the Republic and Jedi," Grievous said, folding his arms behind his back and watching the thousands of warships catapult off into hyperspace. "If my warriors believe in something bigger than that, then I will indulge them."

"Always the cynic," sighed the Nemoidian. "You didn't believe any of that, did you?"

"I spoke truth to them. I too once believed in all those things," Grievous said. "But now, revenge is the only cause preserved to me."

Author's notes: Happy Thanksgiving fellow burgerfats, I told you I'd have a chapter up by today - in fact, this makes two since my promise! I know some of your action-junkies want more Grievous messing people up and more Separatist fleets going to town on Star Destroyers, but you know me. We need to spend a while setting everything up, making the stakes clear, tie up some lose plot points, watch characters prepare for things *ad infinitum*, and have Esera realize she was actually seventeen (17) years old this entire time and has the same human urges as the rest of us. Bet they don't teach you how to deal with that in Jedi school... right, Anakin? Yeah, that's what I thought. These prequel trilogy Jedi were really insufferable, weren't they?

But believe me folks, this is just the beginning, I have two and a half (2.5) chapters in the chute. If everything goes right we'll have three (3) new chapters by Christmas Day. Stay tuned to see how Operation Striking Star unfolds, this holiday season!

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